

**'Health care for kids needs top priority'**

**By Sam Farr and John Laird**

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Almost 800,000 California children do not have health coverage, but the ability of California to cover them may hinge on the outcome of the federal congressional debate over reauthorization of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP.

A healthy SCHIP reauthorization is critical if we are to continue to provide health coverage to California's children at current levels and support our state legislative efforts to expand coverage to more children.

As your representatives, we've made the health of Monterey Bay children our top priority and are working together to make sure more of our children have coverage.

Children with health insurance are more likely to get the care they need to ensure healthy development, preventive care, immunizations to prevent diseases and basic checkups with primary care physicians. Studies have shown that kids with insurance stay healthier, perform better in school and become more productive workers and members of society.

Covering uninsured children also saves money by preventing health problems from becoming more serious. Indeed, the cost of providing insurance for a child is less than \$100 per month, while the average emergency room visit is \$435. And every dollar spent on childhood immunizations saves \$13 down the road.

Over the last 10 years, SCHIP has played a vital role in providing California children with health insurance, including preventive care. Healthy Families, California's flagship SCHIP-funded program, currently provides low-cost coverage to more than 800,000 California children. But with SCHIP funding set to expire in September, the future of Healthy Families is at risk. We need Congress to reauthorize SCHIP with \$50 billion in new funding to keep Healthy Families strong and allow us to do even more for our children.

Healthy Families works in tandem with Medi-Cal to provide health coverage to the majority of California's children who don't have or can't afford employer-sponsored or private health insurance. Medi-Cal covers the neediest children in the poorest families. Healthy Families builds on Medi-Cal, providing coverage to children whose families earn too much to qualify for Medi-Cal but can't afford to pay a minimum of \$12,000 per year (average family premium) for private insurance. Both of these programs are vitally important to the health of our children.

However, even though both programs have been successful, there is still work to be done. We hope to make significant progress this year by passing state legislation that would expand coverage to all California children. Two identical bills, AB 1 (Laird-Dymally) and SB 32 (Steinberg), will provide coverage for the nearly 800,000 children who remain uninsured and lack access to that all-important preventive and regular care by a pediatrician their family knows and trusts.

California is poised to do its part to provide health coverage to more children, whether currently eligible or by expansion of eligibility. The next step is in Washington, where Democratic congressional leaders are working to move forward on children's health.

It's so important that Congress support a SCHIP reauthorization of \$50 billion in new funds that includes state flexibility on ways to cover more children. House leadership is committed to making this happen because doing so will set the stage for states to raise healthier children. And we may need massive support, as President Bush has threatened to veto the legislation.

The congressional debate on SCHIP reauthorization may be centered in Washington, but its effects will be felt right here at home. We will both be fighting in Washington and Sacramento to ensure our children have the health care they need. Please show your support for this important effort.

(Rep. Sam Farr, D-Carmel, represents the Central Coast in Congress while Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, represents the region in Sacramento.)